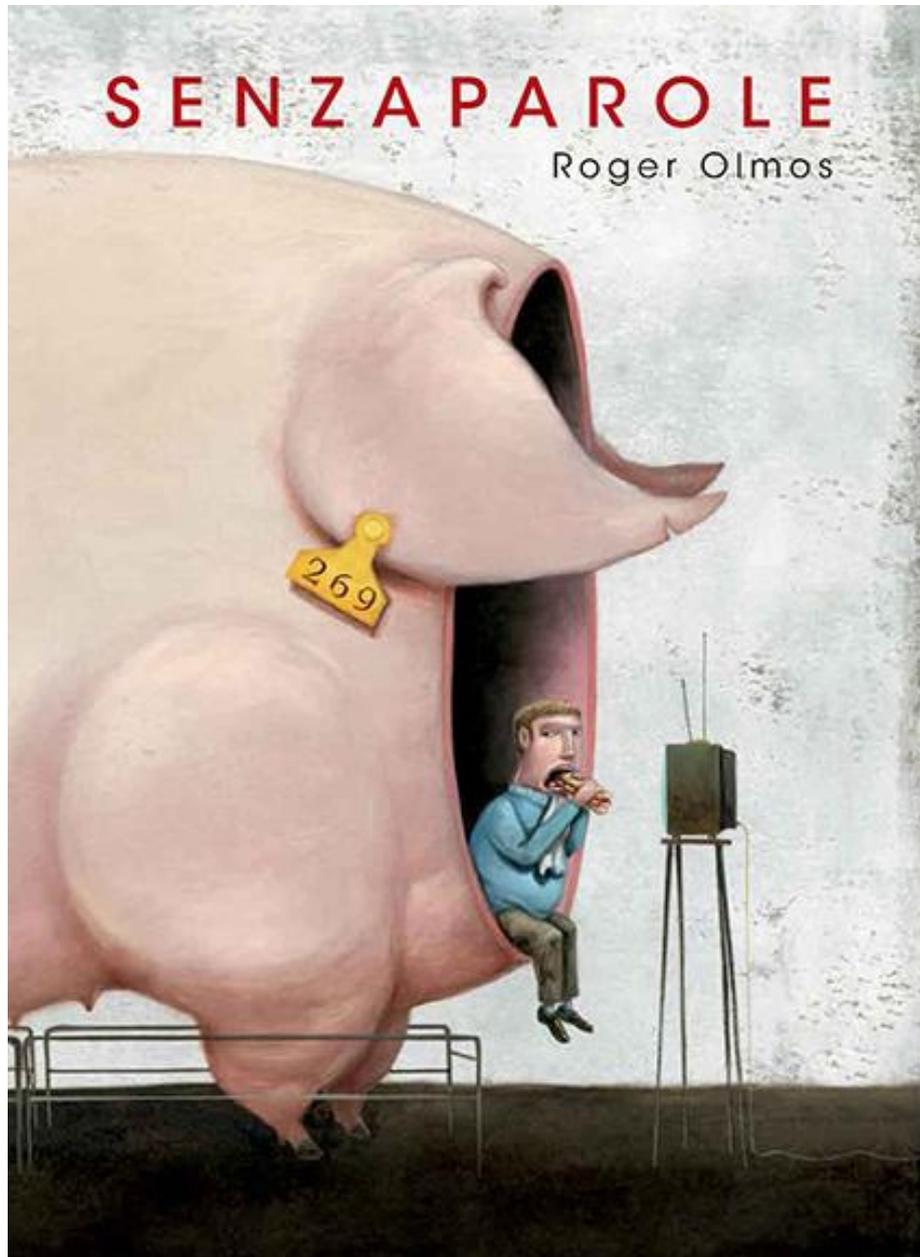


**Earthlings for Children:
Roger Olmos discusses Senzaparole with Friends of Eden**



We are embedded in a speciesist culture where we are inculcated, from early infancy, with the norm of exploiting other sentient animals for the purposes of food, entertainment, clothing and research. We are so deeply encultured with the notion that it is acceptable to use and harm others because they are different to us that we become unable to even see what we are doing, much less critically analyse it. Animal rights activists need to find ways that are acceptable to other people that allow them to critically examine how their lives impact on other animals, without causing them to turn away in defence and denial.

It is understandable that many of us find the idea of only using activist material that is acceptable to humans abhorrent, because we acknowledge that because of our lifestyle choices other animals are

forced to experience what some of us cannot even bear to witness. Yet, if we refuse to meet people where they are able to meet us; if we refuse to be cognisant of their capacity to face the truth, are we not merely facilitating them in remaining mindless, distracted and subconscious?

For some people it is acceptable to learn the truth of the experience of other animals through undercover footage of the most depraved acts of cruelty, including the legal, standard practices used in animal agriculture, research, clothing and entertainment industries. They have the courage to bear witness and once they grasp the realisation of the pain inflicted on other sentient beings they make the decision to stop participating in its perpetration and they become vegan. Other people are incapable of facing the pain they have participated in through their lifestyle choices; they find such material deeply distressing and turn away from graphic footage. For people who cannot tolerate their own personal distress at viewing the distress of others, material that focuses on the sentience or the capacity to feel, rather than the actual suffering of other animals, is often more acceptable. For many people, grasping the fact that sentience is not restricted to one species but shared by all the animals used by humans, is sufficient to prompt behavioural change and compassionate, vegan living.

Nowhere is the debate on suitable activist material more fraught than with respect to what we show children. The material we use to educate children about animal rights is vital and needs careful selection. They are, after all, tomorrow's vegans; tomorrow's animal rights activists. Like adults, they differ in the routes to truth and understanding that they find acceptable. The material they have access to depends on the adults who act as their doorkeepers. By ensuring that we provide excellent educational material that children can access, we ensure that they do not become tomorrow's exploiters.

Roger Olmos has produced a very important piece of work; one that I believe might well be regarded as 'Earthlings' for Children. His book *Senzaparole* (Wordless) is a depiction of the interaction between humans and other animals that does not shy away from illustrating how our mindless, callous use of them hurts them. Yet it depicts this use in a way that adults will find difficult to censor with any justification. It cleverly targets the prominent ways in which children are encultured into viewing other animals as commodities for human use for food, clothing, entertainment and research in ways that appear harmless to us when we distract ourselves from their reality; when we blindfold ourselves to their exquisite sentience and their capacity to experience the harm we inflict on them. *Senzaparole* confronts our distraction and takes off our blindfolds. The sentience of other animals is at the heart of *Senzaparole*. The illustration of the range of emotions expressed in the eyes and on the faces of our victims, in combination (in the film version) with haunting music and appropriate lyrics (*Hope is Gone*, by Moby) and very clever use of variety in perspective taking, is truly a work that bypasses our need for the words of human language.

Senzaparole has been commended by Jane Goodall and Nobel awarded writer J.M. Coetzee. It is published by Logos Edizioni in Italy in collaboration with the [FAADA foundation](http://www.faada.org/) in Spain. It is available in Italian, Spanish and English.

Senzaparole can be purchased in Italian /English at Logos edizioni: <http://www.libri.it/senza-parole-roger-olmos> and in Spanish/English at FAADA: <http://sinpalabras.faada.org/>

Here Roger discusses Senzaparole with the Friends of Eden in this issue of Somebodies, Not Somethings.

Sandra (S). Roger, what prompted you to write Senzaparole?

Roger (R). The idea came from my wife. She suggested I do a book about veganism. I have been vegan for almost five years. I made the decision to become vegan after seeing the film *Earthlings*. It caused me to think and see things in a different way. In food advertising we see happy cows dancing and telling us that we have to eat their yoghurt or milk or cheese. We see pigs recommending that we try their sausages. As an illustrator I've seen many books with stories that are situated in the context of a farm where the cows, rabbits and chickens say "good morning Mr. Farmer!" and he answers "Hello guys, how are you today?" The reality is that he is going to kill them: he is going to take the little rabbit by his back legs and smash his head into a wall, and rip his skin off with a knife.

So why are we telling children that he asks them how they are today?

There are other stories about circuses that have smiling elephants and happy lions jumping across a fire ring while the tamer whips them. No one engages in those unnatural, life threatening activities without being bullied and threatened.

These representations of other animals happen because people in my own field of work who don't know the truth about the animals they are representing are creating these illustrations and advertisements. The little boy is reading a story where a girl plays with a small pig, and they have fabulous adventures together. Once he finishes reading his book, his mother calls him to dinner, and what's on his plate? Pork.....

We wanted to do a book to explain all this. We wanted to change the focus and we wanted to speak to the non-vegan public. That public is a 'meat believing' public where people have been educated since they were born that meat is healthy, milk is good for their bones, leather is expensive and elegant so it is a desirable fabric to wear.....people like me, as I was before. I wanted my work to tell them that those beliefs are wrong. All those things that we took for granted are painful for others..... that the milk or cheese they buy doesn't come from cows who are running happy and healthy in a huge field full of grass.

I wondered what the best way to do this was. So I thought that the best way was to show some images, hard images, yet avoiding the obvious, most disturbing aspects. The technique I used is to let the reader's brain finish the possible ending of the situation. I illustrate it in a poetic way using beautiful images. Most vegan activist material in flyers, posters, videos etc is very raw, very violent. This is the reality; this is the truth for other animals. But unfortunately most of the people who believe the truth of these images and who stop to see them are already vegan. They are people who already know the truth. It is the other people we have to show; it is the non-vegans we have to educate. People like my father or my mother just look away from violent images that show the truth for other animals. It makes them uncomfortable. They don't want to feel guilty. They don't want to know. Showing them raw, violent images is effectively pointing the finger at them, screaming 'it's your fault'. Of course, they don't like that. And it does not leave them space to think about it. Whereas, when I showed Senzaparole to my father he liked it. He stopped to look at the images and he tried to understand them and to understand their message. If I do a book full of pictures with people opening the stomach of a cow with a chainsaw while the animal shakes in pain and terror, with blood splashing everywhere, my father wouldn't like it. For sure, he would try to erase that image as soon as possible from his mind.

People don't think that non human animals have feelings, don't think that they have pain, that they can be sad or happy. They think that other animals are just there for us, to feed us, to amuse us. They think they are inferior. But this is because people don't know. Getting people to become used to new information is a slow process.

In *Senzaparole* I'm not pointing a finger at anybody. I'm not telling the reader what to do or not do. I don't speak about human health either. There is no pressure: just images of the different impacts of our customs and lifestyles. The change must come from the reader. The reader must make his own decisions; not have them imposed by another. If the change comes in this way it will be real. Like it was when it happened for me.

S. What audience did you write for? Adults or children?

R. Both, in fact it's a nice book for parents who want to explain to children what happens to the animals we use; what life is like for them in their worlds. And it is a nice book for adults who are not aware. It is also a useful book for children who want to explain to their parents 😊.

S. What has been the reaction of children to *Senzaparole*?

R. I don't know. It is possibly too early to tell.

S. At what age do you think adults can appropriately read *Senzaparole* to children?

R. I think from three years. It's a good book to show because of the softness of the representations and the fact that they ask the reader to use his or her imagination. Children have great imaginations. It shows different aspects of animal exploitation. Some images show hard situations but there is enough sensitivity to enable it to be shown to small children.

S. You have addressed all basic forms of use and exploitation of other animals in *Senzaparole*. But you have also woven other very important themes into the book. One of the ways in which we desecrate other animals is by turning whole beings or persons into dismembered body parts for their flesh, milk, skin, fur, or feathers. The theme of dismemberment is prolific throughout the book with scenes featuring pieces of flesh, bleeding wounds, body parts, headless beings, and isolated animal features that change, as perspective changes, to expand and reveal the whole person. Can you say something about this theme and the technique you used to illustrate it?

R. I thought this was a good way to show first only what we see, then going further away to show the rest, the hidden reality. And it works, and there is no need to put words on it. The man eating the steak in the opening scene is me. Then we go further and further away from the scene so our perspective changes and becomes clearer and we see all those animals being exploited. We are on top of them in a huge sea made of tears. I use the same technique to show different forms of exploitation. In life we only see the cosmetics; we like to see ourselves as pretty and beautiful. But the reality is that others see us as monsters. In the scene with the orca I show how humans have fun seeing them jumping across the swimming pool but when we change the perspective to see the whole picture we see that this thirty minutes of amusement during the show means an eternal prison for them.



S. Dismemberment is also reflected in the humans who figuratively lose their eyes behind blindfolds and their mouths behind their sweaters. In several scenes the humans are featureless, almost faceless. Can you tell us something about the significance of these techniques?

R. Well, it's very significant on the circus scene for example. When humans are sold a ticket at the entrance it is almost as if they are saying 'we will only show you what we want to show you, and we will hide the rest'. People go to the circus but they never see the chains, the hooks, and the animal's pain. It is also my way of showing that many people don't want to see. They don't want to know.

S. The book also includes illustrations that merge human animal and non-human animal identities: we see humans merge with birds, pigs, bears, and other primates. What is the significance of this merging of species?

R. The book is separated into different parts. In the first there are three illustrations of me in my former life when I used to eat meat. Three images and three zooms where the further we look the more we can see the global situation. In the second part of the book I use the same technique to explore other areas of animal exploitation for cosmetics and entertainment. I used this to show how we only see the surface; we don't look to see what's underneath. In the third part of the book I speak to people. I try to put humans inside the skin of another animal, to get them to imagine how their life would be if they lived in those conditions. I try to get them to see how killing a pig is the same as killing a human being. Pain and suffering are exactly the same for both.

S. Can you explain the scene that depicts humans inside the fishes' bodies, and the human gesture of silence?

R. At the beginning, I was going to put small text on every illustration, a simple sentence to explain the situation. For example, in that case the sentence was: -'We abuse those who have no voice'. That is why we see those fishes with humans asking for silence coming from their mouths. The fishes don't make any sound. Imagine how it would be for fishermen to have to hear millions of fishes in their nets screaming like mad. I'm sure they wouldn't be able to fish as much. But as the book is called Wordless, the images speak for themselves. We decided to engage peoples' imaginations; to facilitate them to think about every image. It is wordless for the animals too. The fish are drowning as they are 'fished' or taken out of the water but they cannot scream.

S. Your depictions of the animals' emotions are directly attributable to human exploitation of them: the separation from his mother's love linked with the block of cheese in the human child's stomach; the soft, warm barrier of fur between his body and the world hanging among the human's clothing; their entrapment and humiliation the source of human children's entertainment; their loss of liberty and pain the price for our narcissism. Are readers of the book making those links?

R. Yes, the message is done in a poetical way, but easy to understand. But I'm open to other interpretations as well. When you see an abstract masterpiece, the title might suggest that the piece represents one thing but you, the viewer, see something else that it represents. What you see is equally valid. The important thing is that I insist that this is a slow process; I do not imagine that the whole world is going to change their minds overnight. But I did and so have others like me because of viewing the same information I saw. So step-by-step the number of people who empathise with other animals is growing, so they are making those links, I guess.

S. Your portrayal of sentience is very moving: the experience in their eyes and on their faces of their fear, dread, hopelessness and grief are heart wrenching. Was it a very emotional book to illustrate?

R. Yes, indeed. Because this book is not a commission from someone else who wrote a story that I had to interpret. The images for Senzaparole came alone; the illustrations were born in my gut, filtered through my heart and composed in my brain. There was quite a lot that I couldn't do, because I was limited by time and the number of pages. While I was working on Senzaparole it was on my mind 24/7: I was constantly thinking, seeing things at the supermarket, on TV, watching people in restaurants, in pet shops... in every single thing that contains some animal exploitation I could think of some imaginative image to explain how our actions harm other animals, an image of the reality that was the complete opposite of the story about other animals that I was seeing all around me.



S. The book also grants other animals the cognitive capacity for confusion and bewilderment. We see evidence of this in the calf's capacity for questioning why he is chained and deprived so that a human child can have his mother's milk. What has been the reaction to inclusion of their cognitive awareness?

R. People think that calves are always with their mother, drinking their milk, and when they have enough, they use the rest for the humans. They have no idea how it works. So my intention was to show why they think that. It is because of the way cows and their milk are represented everywhere. People are obsessed with milk. I recently bought some tea bags and once I got home I saw they contained powdered milk. In a tea bag! They put milk everywhere, and in everything. I wanted to show how the mother is no longer regarded as a cow. She is a 'product'. She is deprived of her son. The calf is hungry, separated from his mother and deprived of her love and of her milk. Of course, the reality for the calf is not the innocent confusion that I have represented. It is sheer panic. I wanted children to see that image; to think about how it would be to be separated from your mother.

S. You address several norms by which children are encultured into viewing other animals as commodities for their use. How have readers reacted to this challenge to socio-cultural norms?

R. Well, it's too soon to make a conclusion. I am still not aware of children's' reactions to the book. The reactions that I have had until now have been positive. But there are still a few people who tell me that that the human being is the most powerful, and he has the right to do what he wants with other species. Some people don't understand the concept of "humiliation " in an animal other than human: they say that other animals can't have this feeling, that they don't feel humiliated because they don't have this capacity. They are the people who then finish the sentence with: - 'they are just

animals'. These are the different theories that people construct from the comfort of their sofa, watching TV, spreading meat paté on toast. It is a slow process to get people to understand the path it took from a small pig to that can of paté. People do not have this information. They can imagine that a steak, for example, came from a dead animal. But they don't have any idea about the real process that it took for a living animal to become a piece of steak. It is the same with zoos, cosmetics, wool etc. There are advertisements with monkeys dressed like tennis players screaming in panic: people think they laugh, but they are crying.

S. The book centres on illustrating the sentience we share with other animals yet it does not flinch from graphic depiction of their blood, tears, and terror. What is your reaction to the description of Senzaparole as 'Earthlings for Children'?

R. Wow! It would be an honor for me if people would think this. It's too big an idea for me to think about...

S. Some of the animals in the book are tagged with the number 269. Do you have an association with the 269 Movement?

R. Yes, I have. I was aware of the movement and I thought that this was a very important symbol from a movement and from people who care enough to try to stop those crazy industries. So I contacted Sasha Boojor from Israel, who runs the 269life page on Facebook. I asked his permission to incorporate that number on the cover of Senzaparole. Originally this number is used on a calf and not on a pig, as it is in my work. Sasha was happy for me to use it so I used it symbolically. It is a symbol that only a few would recognise from the distance.

S. You have not used the word 'vegan' in the book; yet, if I am correct, that is the intended message for the audience. Is that a deliberate aspect of 'wordlessness' or have you avoided use of the word for any other reason?

R. That's correct; I have avoided that word. I am attempting to speak to people who have nothing to do with veganism. I am attempting to speak to people who have preconceived notions of veganism as something to do with hippies, peace and love, with connotations of a sect or something religious. I have tried not to put any label on the book. The exception is the number 269, which is a symbol that is only known by a few.

S. Perhaps using the word in conjunction with a work like Senzaparole will help change these misconceptions. Do you think you might consider using the word in future work?

R. Yes, maybe. But if I do another one I think I will keep that format. Obviously it speaks about having a vegan way of life but if I speak about veganism and use the word vegan this would be in the prologue. I would use the word in a small sentence and only once. But let's see how Senzaparole works and what the reactions to it are.

S. Would you like to say something about FAADA?

I have been collaborating with this foundation for a few years now. We all discussed my project of a book about animal exploitation. FAADA are not publishers or distributors so they didn't know how to do it. So I took a chance with Logos in Italy. Lina, my publisher, liked the idea of a book about

speciesism. So Logos and FAADA started working together on this project: Logos had the infrastructure to publish and distribute a book, and FAADA did very nice work getting the collaboration of J.M. Coetzee, and Dr. Jane Goodall. Getting a Moby song for the clip was marvellous.



S. The book ends on a hopeful note. Are you hopeful of animal equality?

R. I try to think positively about it. Every year there are more conscious people. With the internet we have plenty of information. Industries that were previously unconcerned about the filth of their business are not safe anymore. When material about the reality of life for other animals is seen in images and documentaries it causes shock. Many don't want to believe it, others prefer to turn away, but the huge "pink elephant" is here in the room with us. Sooner or later everyone will have to watch it and say something about it.

S. Roger, are there any points about Senzaparole that I have not asked that you would you like to discuss?

R. No, I think we have covered everything important. I would like to let the book grow by itself and see what people say about it.

I would like to mention, however, that there are important themes that I have not included in the book such as wool, pet shops, exotics, hunting, and one of the most shameful traditions here on my country - the bull fighting. I have chosen simple and easy fields that I believe best address non-vegan viewers. They are perhaps the most obvious themes, but they are not more important than other forms of exploitation. I will keep them the others for the future, maybe for another book?

The film version of Senzaparole can be viewed online, free of charge, in several languages:

English: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bm-j8YSvu0M>

Spanish: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eMv4DT8s8Cs>

Italian: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jTlyJM0w4nE>

French: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uwL_oz4Qu4Q

German: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rUkFmG5ghuY>